DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 985 CS 504 571

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TITLE Rhetorical Dimensions of Performance Appraisal Interviews.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (75th, Philadelphia, PA, March 8-11, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Problems; *Administrator Attitudes; Affective Measures; Anxiety; *Communication Apprehension; *Communication Research; Communication Skills; Employer Employee Relationship; Evaluation Criteria; *Interpersonal Communication; *Interviews; *Personnel Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Performance Appraisal

ABSTRACT

To improve the performance appraisal systems used by personnel offices, a study collected the reactions of 200 managers to giving performance appraisals through interviews, scripts, role enactments, a list writing exercise, and an anxiety measure. The data produced three major findings: (1) managers experienced high levels of anxiety when giving negative appraisals and communicated this anxiety through a number of dysfunctional behaviors, including aggressive or domineering manners; (2) managers' five primary concerns in giving performance appraisals were with the objectivity of performance ratings, the adequacy of the information used during the appraisal process, the limitations of the appraisal system, uncertainty in dealing with hostile interviewee reactions, and the need to maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships following appraisal interviews; and (3) manager descriptions of most pleasant and least pleasant interviews depended on the quality of subordinate performance and subordinate-superior interpersonal relationships. This input was used to develop interview strategies for four extreme cases representing combinations of high and low performance and good and bad interpersonal relationships. (Tables are appended showing anxiety triggers and a matrix indicating the relationship between perceived characteristics of interviewees.) (MM)

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Rhetorical Dimensions of Performance Appraisal Interviews

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Performance appriasal is a central activity in most modern personnel systems and it appears that systematic appraisal is used by an overwhelming majority of organizations. Locher and Teel report 89% of companies with more than 500 employees and 74% of smaller companies employ performance appraisal systems.[1] Field and Holley found that all state government organiations surveyed use performance appraisal systems[2] and Lacho, et. al., noted use of performance appraisal systems in 76% of city government organizations studied.[3] As one would expect, a rich and varied body of literature about performance appraisal has emerged. However, review of this literature displays several anomalies.[4]

First, while the literature on performance appraisal promises something for everyone, appraisals appear to be almost universally disliked. For example, appraisal is said to provide grounds for motivating employees by establishing merit foundations for raises and promotions, provide employees with a sense of accomplishment when their work is reviewed, give employees directions for career development, provide management feedback about needed changes in the work environment, identify areas in which corporate training and hiring programs need revision, select promising employees for advancement and reassignment, and allow employees to build records of success on which to base their expectations. While this is no mean list of promises, noone appears to be very please with the results. One study found that only 27% of the professional and managerial personnel were even "satisfied"[5] and--except for people running the systems--the testimony of professionals is almost unversally negative. Saul Gellerman arques that

> Few, if any, aspects of management reveal as disappointing a gap between potential and actuality as does performance appraisal. Under certain conditions, performance appraisal can contribute to . . . laudable goals . . . [but] those "certain conditions" are seldom created. To make matters worse, many organizations act as if they were unaware of them.[6]

The second anomaly is that while the literature is rich in prescriptions about what ought to be done, it devotes little attention to the means whereby the ends can be accomplished. Prescriptions call for high levels of appraisee participation, maintenance of supportive climates, and development of "authentic" relationships between superiors and subordinates. However the literature tends to ignore problems managers encounter in enacting such behaviors. Available research indicates that managers avoid giving unfavorable feedback and Stockford and Bissel found that foremen inflated their ratings of subordinate performance by over 40% when told they would have to communicate their evaluations to subordinates.[7] Fisher generated a nearly identical pattern in a laboratory setting,[8] and the results are consistent with anecdotal accounts of managers who rate nearly 80% of their subordinates "outstanding" or in the top 10% of all workers.

Finally, while enormous effort has been expended to improve performance appraisal systems, there is little evidence that the results have been successful. Legal pressures generated by EEO legislation and subsequent rulings have fostered sophisticated forms and appraisal procedures. Subjective appraisals emphasizing personality traits and free-form essay procedures have been augmented by MBO procedures and behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS). The most recent innovation is the use of hybrid systems combining rating scales, critical incident methods, and multiple raters. Personnel managers operating appraisal systems generally maintain that the systems are effective but the claim is largely unsubstantiated and the sentiments of line managers are almost universally negative. Harry Levinson reports that "in government, performance appraisal is largely a joke, and in both private and public enterprise, merit ratings are hollow."[9] Schneier and Beatty summarize the sentiments of executives with whom they have worked as follows:

> Most organizations are dissatisfied with their performance appraisal (PA) processes, particularly for administrative managerial positions. They have concerns about its objectivity, its relevance and its validity. In many cases the complaint is that the appraisal system does not work![10]

These anomalies suggest that existing research has failed to employ theoretical constructs which capture the experiences of participants. In fact, most the executives with whom I have worked find the published literature to be remarkably naive and almost wholely irrelevant to their work. As a result, I have employed a variety of qualitative techniques to explore practicing managers' perceptions of appraisal interviews. In this paper, I will briefly describe my research program, summarize some fairly uniform findings, and outline a proposed approach to appraisal interviews based on participants' perceptions.

RESEARCH PROGRAM

My research has taken place in conjunction with professional development programs funded by client organizations. In most instances, a single three-hour block is reserved for discussion of performance appraisal and I have scheduled activities so that data gathering and debriefing precede instructional presentations. I realize that the combination of research and instruction introduces a substantial risk of biasing responses. Potential sources of error include peer pressure, reluctance to publicly disclose personal sensitivities and organizational taboos, and expectancy effests resulting from the instructors known preferances.

In spite of these limitations, the combination of research and instruction provides access to a mature and sophisticated population that would otherwise be unavailable. The sample on

which this report is based includes 120 senior project managers employed by a major defense contractor, 40 data processing managers from a consumer goods manufacturer, and 80 civilian and military employees of the Department of Defense. DOD participants are almost evenly divided between civilians with GS ratings above 15 and Army officers at Lt. Colonel and above. Although diverse career paths are represented by this population, all participants were selected by senior management because they were believed to have potential to assume senior managerial roles. Reflecting traditional demographics in these occupations, only ten women are included in the sample and I use male pronouns deliberately in describing sample characteristics. The characteristic participant is in his mid fifties with nearly twenty-five years experience in managerial roles. The number of subordinates for which participants conduct appraisal interviews ranges from five to twenty and varies with organization and assignment.

Working with these participants in groups of twenty, I have used a variety of "soft" procedures to solicit their perceptions of and feelings about appraisal interviews. Materials subject to analysis include scripts and role enactments of characteristic and stressful appraisal interviews; descriptions of most and least pleasant interviewees; and participant-structured lists of concerns in conducting appraisal interviews. When initial discussions suggested high levels of anxiety associated with the conduct of appraisal interviews, I began using a measure of state anxiety to determine the magnitude of participants distress.

FINDINGS

Although the reseach techniques employed make it impossible to isolate statistically significant conclusions, three findings emerge with remarkable uniformity. First, high levels of anxiety are associated with the conduct of appraisal interviews in which negative information must be communicated. The anxiety measure employed is an affective adjective check list developed by Zucherman with a nominal range of zero to twenty-one.[11] In validation studies, mean scores "at rest" center on 7 and scores of 9.41 or more appear under conditions of anxiety. Scores averaging 2.5 over rest scores are taken to be indicative of substantial anxiety. Sample groups with which I have worked report scores of 7 to 9 on "typical" workdays while reported scores jump to a range of 13 to 15 when participants are asked to visualize themselves conducting an unfavorable appraisal interview. Coincidentally, if I appear to be playing fast and loose with the reported scores, its because the data from which I'm working is relatively limited. Of the six groups to which I've administered the anxiety measure, none would permit me to remove test instruments from the classroom. Most were willing to discuss the anxieties under our nonattribution policy and my data reflect means tabulated in the classroom under the observation of participants.

Although clients' concerns for legal matters have precluded observation of actual appraisal interviews, participants' conduct

in simulated interviews indicates that the anxiety is manifest in a variety of disfunctional behaviors. I have observed managers respond to the interview context with aggressive, abrasive, domineering manners that virtually preclude effective communication.

Second, participant-structured lists of concerns solicited through nominal group technique point to a common set of anxiety triggers in the populations studied. Groups asked to list factors that "cause the greatest amount of discomfort" in conducting appraisal interviews produce lists of thirteen to twenty-three items. These items appear to represent five primary concerns: objectivity of performance ratings, adequacy of information employed in the appraisal process, limitations on the appraisal system, uncertainty in dealing with confrontations and other hostile interviewee reactions, and the need to maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships following appraisal interviews. Representative response items related to each factor are displayed in Table I.

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TABLE I

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Finally, analysis of participant descriptions of characteristic, most pleasant, and least pleasant interviewees reveals a pair of dimensions structuring their cognitive worlds. The first dimension is the perceived quality of subordinate performance. Highly rated employees are described as high performers who do more than asked. They are frequently said to be highly motivated self-starters with a variety of marketable skills. Poorly rated employees are said to be marginal or substandard employees who lack initiatiative. They may also be described as lazy or unmotivated.

The second dimension is the superior-subordinate relationship as perceived by the superior. Managers studied consistently distinguish between subordinates with whom they have "good" interpersonal relationships and those with whom they have "bad" relationships. In this context, "good" subordinates are those who appreciated the managers help and direction, respect of knowledge and ability, and are anxious to listen to him. "Bad" subordinates have little regard for the superior's experiences, believe they know more than he does or have greater ability, attempt to circumvent immediate management, and seek or receive support from superordinate managers. In addition, poorly rated subordinates are often described as having unrealistic expectations and missing cues that should signal difficulty. The extreme case is represented by a subordinate who believes a promotion is in store while his superior is preparing to fire him.

Combining these two dimensions produces a two-by-two matrix

summarizing the range of subordinates encountered by practicing managers in this study. Executives surveyed report experiences with subordinates in each of the cells and Table II summarizes the characteristics of each.

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TABLE II

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APPLICATION

Validating a reconstruction of the type proposed here is largely a matter of individual judgment, but Linda Smirich has proposed an interesting test.[12] She observed that participants may respond to interpretation of their experiences in three ways: "No, you've got it all wrong" sending the researcher back to square one; "yes, but so what" meaning that the researcher has focused on trivial elements of their experience; or "Ah hah, now you've got something" suggesting that the researcher has correctly characterized elements of their experience in new or productive ways. The perspective advanced here passes the "Ah hah" test and all of the groups to which I have introduced it have found it a valuable insight into the situations they encounter. Moreover, it provides valuage insight into the training needs of executives.

All of the executives which whom I've worked in this research project have received some training in conducting performance appraisals. However, the training has emphasized mechanical aspects of the appraisal process--use of prescribed forms, measurement of performance, corporate policies, EEO documentation requirements--but their real concerns in the interpersonal domane have not been addressed. Relying on the input described above, I have been working with an approach to conducting appraisal interviews which is consistent with their views and which is richer and more instructive than other programs.

Since the critical features of appraisal interviewee as seen by their superiors are task performance and interpersonal relationships with the superior, I use the matrix described above to organize interview strategies. Extreme cases represented by combinations high and low performance and good and bad interpersonal relationships. Three of the four extreme cases are particularly anxiety arousing while executives are prone to make unintentional errors in the fourth.

The case in which managers are prone to unintentional errors involves a high performer with whom the manager has a good relationship. On the face of it, this hardly seems to be a tough case because the manager has everything going in his favor. Unfortunately, managers have a hard time leaveing well enough alone. This problem is particularly severe for managers who take

some popular literature seriously and use their most-favored subordinates to practice prescribed appraisal behaviors. In this case, special behaviors may threaten the interpersonal relationship or create uncertainties concerning performance expectations. I council mangers appraising interviewees in this cell to make the interviews as brief as possible and lay out necessary materials without delay or strategy.

The second tough case is presented by the low performer with whom the manager has a good interpersonal relationship. This is the ideal time for what Mairer calls a problem-solving approach: the interviewer should help the interviewee identify barriers to improved performance and generate a plan for improvement. This stategy creates a counciling atmosphere and a supportive climate is essential. Fortunately, the favorable relationship usually makes it possible to address task issued directly.

The third tough case is presented by high performers with whom the manager has a poor relationship. Performance is not an issue, but the ability of the pair to work together is in jeopardy and the relationship question must be addressed. I recommend managers facing this situation use the favorable performance as a means of approaching the relationship issue. However, many managers have difficulty levelling with a hostile subordinate, especially when their performance is threatening. Preparing for such cases, I drill managers in the use of active listening techinques and recommend the use of what Mairer calls a tell-and-listen approach.

The final tough case is presented by the poor performer with whom the manager has a poor relationship. This is a tough case because the manager has nothing working for him. However managers often fail to observe that they also have little to lose: in most cases, a poor performer is easily replaced and it is easy to develop the documentation needed to terminate employment. My recommendations for dealing with this situation are inconsistent with literature calling for supportive, problem-solving approaches to unsatisfactory performance. I think--and the managers with whom I work agree--that efforts to be supportive may be taken as signs of weakness and may be misread as support for inappropriate behaviors. So, I argue, managers should deal with this situation through confrontation: come to the interview prepared for a verbal dogfight and make sure they win.

CONCLUSION

The material reported here provides some insight into the world of practicing managers and establishes the foundations of a well-received training program. However, three limitations should be noted.

First, my research has been limited to interviewer perceptions. Interviewees might see things differently, but the fact that all of the particpants in this study are themselves subject to appraisal by their superiors leads me to believe that

all critical factors may be included in the proposed structure.

Second, and this is probably a more significant limitation, all participants in this study were selected by their superiors as "fast trackers" or "high potential managers". We know from other research that their perceptions are unique[13] and it would be interesting to explore the reactions of managers who have not been selected to participate in the sessions.

Finally, the combination of research and instruction introduces substantial risk of influencing the subjects reactions. I am sensitive to this danger and realize that more rigorously controlled studies would be desirable. However, mean salary for the sample population exceeds $50,000 and the value of an hour with a group of twenty approaches $1,000. As a result, it is unlikely that the population would be available for less pragmatic research designs.

NOTES

[1]A. H. Locher and K. S. Teel, "Performance Appraisal--A Survey of Current Practices," Personnel Journal, 56 (1977), 245-247, 254.

[2]H. S. Field and W. H. Holley, "Subordinates' Characteristics, Supervisors' Ratings, and Decisions to Discuss Appraisal Results," Academy of Management Journal, 20 (1977), 315-321.

[3]K. J. Lacho, et. al., "A Study of Employee Appraisal Systems of Major Cities in the United States," Public Personnel Management, 8 (1979), 111-125.

[4]See especially David L. DeVries, et. al., Performance Appraisal on the Line (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981). Useful summaries and citations are included in Cal W. Downs, et. al., Professional Interviewing (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), Michael E. Stano and N. L. Reinsch, Jr., Communication in Interviews (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982), and Charles J. Steward and William B. Cash, Jr., Interviewing Principles and Practices (3rd ed.) Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1982).

[5]DeVries, et. al., p. 78.

[6]The Management of Human Resources (Hinsdale, Illinois: The Dryden Press, 1976), p. 165.

[7]L. Stockford and H. W. Bissell, "Factors Involved in Establishing a Merit Rating Scale," Personnel, 26 (1949), 94-116.

[8]Cynthia Fisher, "Transmission of Positive and Negative Feedback to Subordinates: A Laboratory Investigation," Journal of Applied Psychology, 64 (1979), 533-540.

[9]"Appraisal of What Performance?" Harvard Business Review (July-August, 1976), p. 165.

[10]C. E. Schneier and R. W. Beatty, "Integrating Behaviorally-Based and Effectiveness-Based Methods," Personnel Administrator, 24 (1979), 65.

[11]Marvin Zuckerman, "The Development of an Affect Adjective Checklist for the Measurement of Anxiety," Journal of Consulting Psychology, 24 (1960), 457-462.

[12]Linda Smircich, "The Concept of Culture and Organizational Analysis," SCA/ICA Conference on Interpretive Approaches to Organizational Communication (1981), p. 11.

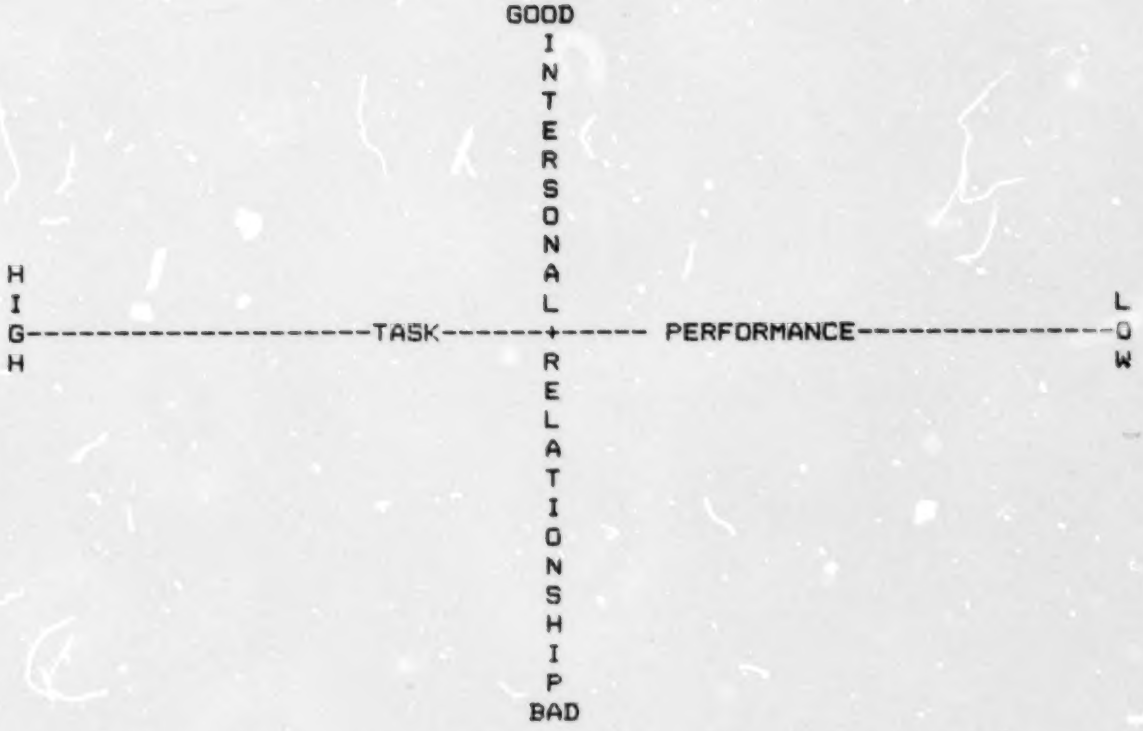
[13]Gary Gemmill and Don DeSalvia, "The Promotion Beliefs of Managers as a Factor in Career Progress: An Exploratory Study," Solan Management Review, 18 (1977), 75-81.

TABLE I

ANXIETY TRIGGERS

OBJECTIVITY	"discussing subjective factors or attitudes" "dealing with subjective factors" "basing criticisms on past records" "distinguishing the person from the performance appraised"
INFORMATION ADEQUACY	"having adequate documentation to support criticism" "having adequate information on which to base evaluation"
LIMITATIONS	"relating salary levels to performance" "giving specific directions for improvement" "discussing future prospects" "having adequate training to conduct the interview" "working in the rigid structure" "handling time pressures"
CONFRONTATIONS	"handling comparisons to other workers" "coping with disagreement and argument" "motivating the employee" "dealing with managerial faults" "responding to unrealistic interviewee expectations" "working with individuals who don't want feedback" "working with dissatisfied interviewees" "responding to defensiveness or anger" "countering hidden motives" "dealing with confrontations" "receiving little feedback from the interviewee" "coping with hostility and anger"
RELATIONSHIPS	"maintaining interpersonal relationships" "avoiding hostility and resentment after the interview" "shifting to a professional role" "feeling compassion for those with limited potential"

TABLE II


GOOD
INTERSONAL
RELATIONSHIP
BAD
HIGH
TASK
PERFORMANCE
LOW